

Skiing for smiles

■ Fund-raiser helps strengthen valley families

By KARA BASKO
The Daily Inter Lake

If Levi Nickel added up all the miles he's skied and money he's raised for child-abuse prevention, it would amount to a lot of smiles on the faces of valley children.

Nickel started participating in the Ski A Mile For A Child's Smile fund-raiser with his mother, Cheryl Nickel, at the tender age of 4. Now 16, he and his mother are looking forward to skiing on Sunday for their 12th year in a row.

Over the years, his focus has changed, Nickel said. When he was younger, he didn't realize that he was raising money for a good cause; he was just having fun. As he mastered his skis, he became determined to ski farther every year, adding laps until he peaked at 24 miles.

The year he did that, his mother said with a laugh, all the free food was gone by the time he completed his last lap.

Although Nickel was the top fund-raiser in the youth category last year, he's a little more laid-back now. He once again focuses on having fun, taking time to talk to other skiers and helping small children get the hang of their skis.

"They have a lot more fun when you help them," he said.

The involvement of younger children is one of the things that attracts the Nickels to Ski A Mile.

"You see a lot of fund-raisers that are very adult fund-raisers, even though they benefit youth," his mother said. "This is one that kids can actually do."

Although the focus has always been on supporting positive family relations, Ski A Mile has not always benefited the same organization.

Susan Christofferson, executive director of the Nurturing Center, said that since the fund-raiser is family-focused, her organization has been indirectly involved since the beginning, but the Nurturing Center's programs have benefited only in the last two years.

The Child Abuse Prevention



Robin Loznak/Daily Inter Lake

LEVI NICKEL, 16, and his mother, Cheryl, pose for a photo with their cross-country skis. Levi has been participating in Ski A Mile For A Child's Smile fund-raisers for 12 years.

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Council started the fund-raiser 17 years ago. After changing its name to Flathead Council for Families, it went out of business, and Northwest Montana Human Resources took over Ski A Mile.

Two years ago, Doug Rauth, executive director of Northwest Montana Human Resources, decided the fund-raiser fit the Nurturing Center's programs perfectly and turned Ski A Mile over to the Nurturing Center.

A few changes have been made since then. The name of the fund-raiser was changed from Ski A Mile For A Kid's Smile to Ski A Mile For A Child's Smile. It no longer works on a pledge-per-mile basis. Instead, flat pledges take the pressure off racking up the miles, making the event more accessible to families and non-skiers.

"It's not so much about skiing as bringing in money to help families stay strong and healthy," Christofferson said.

The purpose of the fund-raiser is always at the front of her mind as she crusades against child abuse.

"We tend to bury our heads in the sand about child abuse," she said.

Pretending that it doesn't happen here will not protect the children who are harmed. Christofferson said that reaching out to parents before things go wrong and encouraging them to make positive changes can reduce child abuse.

Here's how you can help

The 17th annual Ski A Mile For a Child's Smile fund-raiser takes place Sunday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Glacier Nordic Center at Whitefish Lake Golf Club.

Cross-country ski equipment is provided for children and adults, and food and beverages are free all day.

Pledges must be collected by the day of the event. Prizes will be awarded for the most pledges collected in team, family, adult and youth categories.

The money raised will support the Nurturing Center's child abuse prevention programs: Family Friend, a volunteer home visitor program, and ParentCare, a weekly support group with no-cost child care.

Pledge forms are available at the Nurturing Center and all corporate sponsors: Wendy's, KOFI radio, KCFW television and Northwest Health Care.

For more information, call the Nurturing Center at 756-1414.

To that end, the money raised is used for the Nurturing Center's family-strengthening programs, Family Friend and ParentCare.

Both programs target overstressed, overburdened parents who may come from backgrounds where physical reactions were common, Christofferson said.

ParentCare is a no-cost support group open to all parents. It meets Thursdays from 6-7:30 p.m. at First Presbyterian Church, 540 S. Main St. in Kalispell. Free child care is provided, and children have opportunities to address their specific issues and needs while their parents share their concerns with other parents.

The content of each meeting is determined by the parents,

although there is a professional group facilitator present.

Family Friend is a mentoring program that pairs community volunteers with parents. The matches work one-on-one to reduce isolation, build self-esteem, role model positive adult/child interactions, teach parenting skills and enhance the parent/child relationship.

The Family Friend program is actually what drew Cheryl Nickel into Ski A Mile. She was one of the first volunteers in the program. She and her match still keep in touch, and they frequently participated in Ski A Mile

together in earlier years. Last year, they were surprised to bump into each other on the course.

Seeing Cheryl, Levi, Cheryl's Family Friend match and her son all out skiing made her realize the impact these programs can have on families, Christofferson said.

For more information on ParentCare or Family Friend, call the Nurturing Center at 756-1414. Volunteers are needed for Family Friend. The next training session begins at the end of the month.